



TESTIMONY

Submitted by Ann Wilson, Client Services Manager
Companions & Homemakers, Inc.

Appropriations Public Hearing on the Governor's Proposed FY 23 Budget Adjustments for Human Service Agencies

February 23, 2022

Distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee, my name is Ann Wilson. I speak to you today as the daughter of elderly parents who benefit from homecare services, and as the client services manager at Companions & Homemakers, one of Connecticut's oldest and largest homecare agencies who has been providing Medicaid-funded services since 1990. I'm here today to talk about the financial challenges we have faced for years and continue to face delivering these essential homecare services.

Agencies like ours provide non-medical care to thousands of Connecticut elders in the form of companion, homemaking and personal care services, and we employ an equally large workforce of caregivers. The care we provide is delivered 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, even during inclement weather and COVID-19. These services are often the gateway to helping to identify nutritional, physical or cognitive declines over time, and serve the critical purpose of helping older adults accept and acclimate to having help in their own homes, thus avoiding the more costly option of institutional care.

Companion care makes it possible for older adults who no longer drive to get to doctors' appointments and the grocery store. Companions can help with medication reminders and meal preparation and with socialization. For many clients, we are their only source of personal interaction in a given day.

Homemaking provides an able body to help with keeping the house in order, and includes things like vacuuming, laundry, changing bed linens, cleaning bathrooms and washing floors.

For those who need hands-on help with dressing, grooming, bathing, incontinence care and personal care provided by a dedicated caregiver can help an older adult thrive at home where they want to be.

And for the elderly person who needs someone present in the home around the clock to make sure all these essential daily activities are getting done on a routine basis, live-in care makes it possible for the client to do so safely at home.

Some view these services as non-essential. On the contrary, what we do is absolutely essential. Without these services in place, many older adults would not be able to get out of bed and could suffer the discomfort of incontinence. Some would be unable to prepare meals or, in some cases be able to eat, and most would be unable to get to the doctor, go shopping, or socialize with others. Non-medical homecare services allow people to age in place at home with dignity.

The non-medical industry is at a painful crossroad. Though 1.7% of state funding was approved by the legislature at the last legislative session, but we have yet to see a penny. We have gone without increases for years while costs to deliver care, including recent increases in minimum wage, have driven a number of agencies to stop providing these services or close altogether.

The current reimbursement rate for companion in Connecticut is \$16.88 per hour. Minimum wage is \$13 an hour today, and will increase again to \$14 per hour before the next legislative session. In Arizona, where the current minimum wage stands at \$12.80 per hour, the Medicaid reimbursement rate is \$22.84. The disparity is hard to swallow. Our caregivers, who are making minimum wage, are not minimum wage workers and demand more. Many of our caregivers who are parents themselves have a difficult time knowing that their sixteen-year old is making the same as a cashier in a retail store.

COVID has been a particular challenge. While we continued to ensure homebound older adults got out of bed, ate nutritious meals, and had help with bathing, toileting and dressing, we also had to purchase and deliver critical PPE to protect our clients and caregivers, and pay higher wages to those who provided care to COVID positive clients. Even today, we continue to struggle with the ongoing labor shortage and increased costs to attract and retain good caregivers that were created by the pandemic.

Our industry is battered and bruised, and as a business, it is fast becoming impossible to provide these services. If these services disappeared, the results would be catastrophic, not only for the elderly who rely on them to function, but to the state, whose costs for institutional care would skyrocket.

I'm asking that the promised 1.7% increase in reimbursement rates be put into effect immediately. I'm asking that the promised ARPA funding be put in place by March 31st so that we can remain viable and so that the state doesn't lose its 10% matching federal funds. I'm asking, on behalf of all the non-medical agencies that continue to fight the good fight, and on behalf of all the older adults, our caregivers, and my parents and aunts and uncles who need these essential services. Please... find a way to support your elderly constituents and the agencies who serve them in a meaningful and sustainable way.

Thank you.

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